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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 009396

SIPDIS

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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/19/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAG REPLACES SHI'ITE JUDGE IN QATIF

REF: A. RIYADH 9142

[1](#)B. RIYADH 8582

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) EP daily Al-Youm reported on December 18 that a new Shi'ite judge, Sheikh Ghalib Al-Hamad, has succeeded Sheikh Abdullah Al-Khunaizi as Shi'ite judge in Qatif. According to the report, Al-Hamad had been appointed by royal decree two weeks earlier to fill the position that Al-Khunaizi had filled "temporarily," following the death of his brother, Sheikh Abdul Hamid Al-Khunaizi, three years ago. The report describes Al-Hamad's official position as President of the Court of Shi'ite Endowments & Inheritance in Qatif Governorate and says that he enjoys the support of the Minister of Justice and the Shi'ite community.

[1](#)2. (C) The Mayor of Qatif confirmed Al-Hamad's appointment to CG and PoLOff on December 18, adding that a second judge, Sheikh Abdul Rasool Al-Bayati, would also be involved in the court, we presume as an assistant to Al-Hamad. Post contact Tayseer Al-Khunaizi said that he knew of the appointment but added that he did not know anything about Al-Hamad and that the position of judge was "not a big deal" as its jurisdiction was simply "Shi'a family matters." Mohammad Al-Khalifa, vice president of the Seihat Society, a charitable organization in one of Qatif's villages, also confirmed the appointment and said that Al-Hamad enjoyed broad support. Jafar Al-Shayeb had predicted this appointment to us on December 11, criticizing Al-Khunaizi as ineffective and saying that Al-Hamad represented "new social forces" in Qatif (ref A).

Comment

[1](#)3. (C) Post sees several dynamics at work in this appointment. First, we believe that Al-Hamad is likely an ally of Al-Shayeb and Hassan Al-Saffar based on Al-Shayeb's endorsement of him, Al-Khunaizi's strong attack on Al-Saffar and his associates (ref B), and our understanding of the political savvy of Al-Shayeb and Al-Saffar, both of whom seem to have a good working relationship with Saudi authorities. As such, Al-Hamad's appointment appears to be a victory for Al-Shayeb and Al-Saffar. The change in judges may also be part of a change in the official status of the court. Under Al-Khunaizi, the court was known as a "Ja'afari court" (referring to the Shi'a school of Islamic jurisprudence) and, according to our contacts, did not enjoy official status with the Ministry of Justice; the Emir of the Eastern Province, not the Ministry, paid the judge's salary. The title of the court announced in the paper, President of the Court of Shi'ite Endowments and Inheritance, is more official and may foreshadow greater recognition and formal support of the court by the state. The appointment of an assistant judge (or judges - we heard from one contact that there might be two assistants) also may indicate greater official recognition and financial support for the court. If true, this will help the court address two problems that our Shi'a contacts, including Al-Khunaizi and Al-Shayeb, have noted: encroachment by the local Sunni courts on the jurisdiction of the Shi'a court and inadequate resources for the Shi'a court to handle the community's needs. Post will continue to gather more information on the dynamics and significance of this development. End comment.

Bio Note

[1](#)4. (C) According to the news report and post contacts, Sheikh Ghalib bin Hassan Al-Hamad is 52 years old and is married, with three sons and one daughter. He holds a bachelor's and a master's degree from King Saud University; his master's degree is in Islamic Economics. He has studied with "prominent" Shi'a scholars in Al-Hasa, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran, and recently returned from a trip to Iran. (Comment: Hassan Al-Saffar, who is about five years younger than Al-Hamad, also studied in Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran. When we

meet with Al-Hamad we will ask under which scholars he studied as one measure of possible ideological overlap between the two individuals. End comment.) End bio note.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
GFOELLER